



Travels Through Sweden, Finland, and Lapland to the North Cape

I : Chapter XV
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Julkaisija: London, 1802.

Julkaisu: Travels through Sweden, Finland, and Lapland to the North Cape
/ Joseph Acerbi. S. 227-236.

Verkkojulkaisu: 2002

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CHAPTER XV

Departure from Yervenkyle - Progress through a large Forest - Danger to be apprehended from Wolves - Vestiges of a Conflagration in the Wood - Frequency of these Conflagrations and the Causes thereof - Devastation occasioned among the Trees of the Forest by Storms - Road through the Forest; its Inconveniencies - Passage over the Ice ; the Fears and Alarms with which it is attended - The generous Simplicity of some Peasants who served as Guides.

ON leaving the village of Yervenkyle, we came upon a wood or forest famous in Finland for its size, and particularly its vast length, which is about eighty English miles. We had to traverse it in its full extent, and I was inclined to compose myself to sleep the whole way, in order to elude the irksomeness of a road what promised so little variety, and that I might make a proper use of the sullen gloom caused by the thickness of the trees. Besides I was confident that neither robbers nor beasts of prey would interrupt my repose; the first being unknown in the country, and the second rarely so pressed with hunger as to become bold enough to set upon travellers. The only wild beasts to be dreaded in this wood are the wolves, which even when starving will not venture to attack a man, though they may not spare his horse. But it sometimes happens that the wolves, in the anguish of famine flock together, lose their usual timidity, and from the confidence of association become so intrepid as to set upon the horses yoked to sledges. In such an attack it is extremely dangerous to be overturned and left upon the road by the horse: he naturally takes fright, and sometimes makes his escape ; then the wolves perceiving the traveller defenseless upon the ground, fall upon and devour him. These accidents, however, are not at all to be apprehended by a numerous party like our's, as the wolves keep at a distance and fly at the noise of sledges and the voices of several people. We saw abundance of their tracks every where on our route, but we did not perceive a single wolf, nor any ravenous animal except foxes, which used to look us steadily in the face for a moment, while we amused ourselves by whistling after them.

The dreary silence and obscurity of a thick wood, whose branches forming a vaulted roof, cut off the traveller from a view of the skies, and admit only faint and dubious rays of light, is always an imposing object to the imagination; the awful impression the mind experiences under this majestic gloom, this dismal solitude, this desertion of nature, is not to be described. The temperature of the air is much milder in the interior of this wood than the external atmosphere; a difference which is extremely perceptible to one who like us enters the wood after traversing a lake or open plain.

The only noise the traveller hears in this forest is the bursting of the bark of the trees, from the effect of the frost, which produces a loud but dull sound. This journey was by no means so uninteresting as I had expected it would be. Partial fires, conflagrations and tempests had committed frightful ravages in the bosom of this forest which presented us here and there with exhibitions highly surprising and impressive. Every body has heard of the conflagrations so frequent in - Sweden, and in the countries of the North in general. Entire mountains and tracts of several miles covered with woods, are liable to be devoured by

flames. Much has been said and written in order to explain the origin of those fires. Some have attributed them to the rays of the sun, which continue so long above the horizon: but this is fabulous and unworthy of serious attention. The presence of the sun never produced such an effect and the less so in Sweden and Finland, where the heat of the solar rays never rises above fifty or sixty degrees of Celsius, which is far below the power necessary to produce a conflagration. It has been incontestibly proved by a series of observations, that between the greatest summer's heat and the severest winter's cold known, there is only one thirty-second of difference.*

There are two special causes of those conflagrations. The first is simple and accidental, and arises from the carelessness of the peasants, who travel smoaking their pipes through this wood, where a spark falling upon withered leaves- or plants, with the assistance of a little wind, cannot fail to excite fire and even flame. This is not all; the peasants frequently make a fire in the wood, either to warm themselves or to cook their victuals and are often too negligent to extinguish it entirely. The second cause we may trace to the political constitution and laws of the country: generally speaking it is in the crown forests that those conflagrations take place. In many districts the peasants obtain their wood from the king's forests and pay for it a certain tax. There are precise limits within which they are permitted to cut, and they are liable to be punished with a fine, if they are found to proceed in their operations beyond the fixed boundaries : but if a fire happens to break out in any part of a forest belonging to the crown, the peasantry of that district have a right to cut down and carry home such trees as have been injured by the burning. Thus the peasants who are in want of wood, and have too small a share in the forest for the supply of their demands, are prompted from an interested motive to set fire to it in their own neighbourhood, being entitled to appropriate whatever trees have been touched by the flames, which are generally in such abundance as to stock a housekeeper with wood for four, or perhaps six years, according to the magnitude of the ravages which the forest has suffered. It would appear that the government, if it were aware of the circumstance might effectually check those unlawful acts; not so effectually by inflicting heavy punishments, as by ordering that the peasants should pay the same sum for the use of the wood that might be gathered, injured by conflagration, as for that in a found state; and that till the former was used they should not be allowed to cut any wood in the forest. There may, however be difficulties in executing such measures which a stranger is not acquainted with; and hence we will not blame the government for what may not perhaps be in its power to remedy.

I saw in this forest the disastrous wreck of one of those conflagrations, which had devoured the wood through an extent of six or seven miles, and which exhibited a most dismal spectacle. You not only saw trunks and large remains of trees lying in confusion on the ground, and reduced to the state of char coal, but also trees standing upright, which, though they had escaped destruction had yet been miserably scorched: others, black and bending down to one side, whilst in the midst of the ruins of trunk and branches appeared a group of young trees, rising to replace the former generation ; and, full of vigour and vegetable life, seemed to be deriving their nourishment from the ashes of their parents. The devastations occasioned by storms in the midst of those forests is still more impressive and presents a picture still more diversified and majestic It seems wholly inconceivable in what manner the wind pierces through the thick assemblage of those woods, carrying ruin and desolation into particular districts where there is neither opening nor scope for its ravages.

* Lettres fur l'Origine des Sciences, &c. par M. Baillie, p. 292.

Possibly it descends perpendicularly from heaven in the nature of a tornado, or whirlwind, whose violence nothing can oppose, and which triumphs over all resistance. Trees of enormous size are torn from their roots, magnificent pines, which would have braved on the ocean tempests more furious, are bent like a bow, and touch the earth with their humbled tops. Such as might be thought capable of making the stoutest resistance are the most roughly treated; and those hurricanes, like the thunder of heaven, which strikes only the loftiest objects passing over the young, and sparing them, because they are more pliant and flexible, seem to mark the strongest and most robust trees of the forest which are in condition to meet them with a proud opposition, as alone worthy of their rage. Let the reader fancy to himself three or four miles of forest where he is continually in the presence of this disastrous spectacle; let him represent to his imagination the view of a thick wood, where he can scarcely see one upright tree, where all of them being thus forcibly inclined, are either propped by one another or broken in the middle of the trunk, or torn from their roots and prostrated on the ground : every where trunks, branches, and the ruins of the forest interrupting his view of the road, and exhibiting a singular picture of confusion and ruin.

There is a great road through the midst of this forest which may be tolerably suited for travelling in summer; but the peasants do not always continue upon it during the winter season; for then they find no difficulty in traversing a lake or a river, and are not obliged to follow the windings which the great Line of road naturally makes, in order to avoid accidental interruptions: they constantly study to proceed as much as possible in a straight Line and that they may not lose themselves in those dark and melancholy woods, the first who lights upon the most convenient way, marks all the trees with an axe (as is done in America), in order to point out the route to such as may come after him. Those roads, however, are full of stones, which render travelling extremely unpleasant. Our bones were severely bruised by the eternal jolting of the sledge.

After the embarrassments of this forest we received some compensation for our flow and, tedious progress, by the agreeable sensation we experienced in crossing a lake, where we seemed to fly with all the velocity our horses were capable of, and without being in the least shaken. We courageously braved the danger of destruction with which the cracking of the ice seemed to threaten us, and disregarded the rents which ran in all directions under our feet. We certainly should not have encountered the perils we were exposed to in crossing this river, had we not found travelling by land a thousand times more fatiguing and disagreeable both on account of the bad state of the surface for our mode of travelling, and the inconvenience of the stones which sometimes made us start from the sledge before we were aware of the obstacle that lay in our way.

It was principally between Tuokola and Gumsila that we found travelling on the river harassing and dangerous; and we should probably have perished but for the assistance of two peasants, who undertook to serve us as guides, and point out to us the places of the river where the ice was strongest and in best condition to support us. Between Tuokola and Gumsila the river is extremely rapid, and the current being stronger in some places than in others, the ice in those parts is of a slender texture, so that it was necessary in order to ensure our safety, to have a perfect knowledge of the direction on of the current in summer. Our guides went before us in their sledge and we followed close behind them with all the precision which an affair of such delicacy and importance requires. Having come to a part of the river which was almost entirely open,

we thought it would be imprudent to attempt to pass it. We had however no alternative but either to return and travel five or six miles by land, with all its known inconveniencies or passing hard by a house, to make our horses leap a barrier, and drag the sledge over a heap of stones till we should arrive again at the ice of the same river.

We chose to prefer this last mode of proceeding; the horses cleared the barrier, we all gave our assistance to lift up the sledge and throw it on the other side and we re-embarked on the ice close by a little mill. Having got upon the ice, we were much surprised and concerned to find, that we had given ourselves all this trouble only to reach a place where we had perils still more alarming to encounter. The river was open on both sides and it was necessary for the sledge to pass over a crust of ice which had maintained itself in the middle, and under which the water made a frightful noise. Our guides, who ventured on it first assured us that there was no danger, and that when we had crossed this piece we should have nothing more to fear during the remainder of our journey. It was at the moment a bitter pill to swallow; but it promised to procure us much comfort afterwards. Although our guides had by this time got to the other side, our anxiety was not diminished; we were unable to conquer the reluctance excited in our minds by the view and noise of the water the rapidity of the current, which shewed itself at two openings, and by the apparent fragility of the crust of ice which was to support us in the midst of the stream. With exemplary discretion we embraced the wise expedient (which made our Finlandish peasants laugh immoderately) of creeping upon our knees, passing a hillock of ice that obstructed our way in that humble posture and of sliding on our feet to the opposite side, where we joined our sledge which waited our arrival. This ridiculous scene was highly entertaining, and converted into mirth the terror of all our dangers.

Having crossed the river at this place, our guides informed us that we had no farther occasion for them, and that we might pursue our journey without the smallest apprehension. They instantly left us without waiting for any sort of recompence for their services; and when we called them back and offered them money, they seemed astonished that we should think of rewarding them. One of them remained deaf to all our importunities, refused our money with firmness and dignity, and went away without it. Our narrow minds, that are filled with notions of what is called refinement, are at a loss to conceive how those people, who appear so poor and low in our eyes, merely because they have not a coat cut after the model of our's, should refuse money, and submit to so much toil only for the pleasure of being useful to others, and for the insipid satisfaction of doing good. Such examples, but too rare and too little known in the polished circles of great towns, are not so in those places which are far removed from a metropolis, where morals have become the victim of selfish and corrupt passions. It is the traveller, who, constantly carrying about with him his ideas of civilization (which is often only a different name for a system of refined selfishness), introduces his degraded notions into the bosom of a simple people, obliging from instinct and generous and beneficent from nature. We for ever consider it as incumbent upon us to reward every little attention with money; and knowing no gratification equal to that of receiving pecuniary acknowledgment, we render the purest pleasures of our nature venal by the recompenses we bestow, and corrupt and debase, by views of interest that sense of duty which is cherished by a sentiment of pleasure and enjoyed by every moral heart upon performing a good action to his fellow men.



J. Bye sc.

Perilous Passage on the Ice